



December 2007
Ice Storm Summary

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In December 2007, Oklahoma experienced an ice storm of historic proportions. A corridor from the central portion of the State, extending to the northeast, resulted in the largest power outage experienced by the numerous electrical cooperatives servicing the area. The outage, which lasted anywhere from hours to weeks, taxed both governmental and service provider agencies throughout the region. This report details the Heartline 2-1-1 response.



Heartline 2-1-1 is the designated Information and Referral Service for the nine counties in Central Oklahoma: Canadian, Cleveland, Grady, Kingfisher, Lincoln, Logan, McClain, Oklahoma, and Pottawatomie Counties. During

the disaster, the task of 2-1-1 centers expanded to include disaster assistance by being **the** central source of disaster relief information as well as the contact point for follow-on needs, easing the burden on 9-1-1 Centers as well as State Agencies assisting in disaster recovery.

This summary will be an overview of the disaster response of Heartline 2-1-1, identify what worked well and areas where improvements are needed.

Pre-Storm

On November 29, 2007, the Staff of Heartline participated in a tabletop exercise at the offices of Heartline. Other participants were the Red Cross, Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County Emergency Management personnel, UPS, the Oklahoma City Fire Department, the United Way of Central Oklahoma, the Regional Food Bank, and the Oklahoma County Sheriff's Department. The topic of the tabletop exercise was ironically an Ice Storm.

The tabletop exercise allowed Heartline 2-1-1 to develop an Operational Plan for such an event, which included the selection of a backup facility, should there be a power loss, as well as develop a plan for food and water distribution in a cooperative agreement with UPS and Regional Food Bank.

During the Incident

On the morning of December 7, 2007, the power at the Heartline facility began to show signs of impending failure. At approximately 2:30 PM, power was lost. At approximately 2:40 PM, after it was learned that the back-up facility was also without power, contact was made with a representative of the Oklahoma City Emergency Operation Center (EOC), with arrangements being made to relocate to their facility.



By approximately 3:30, the Call Center had been set up at the EOC. A major challenge was encountered with the actual transferring of the phones. In order to become operational, the EOC established several “seven digit” numbers, releasing a press release with those numbers to call in addition to “2-1-1”. Carrie DeWeese (DHS) and Steve Willoughby (ACOG), both members of the State 2-1-1 Collaborative, along with Ronnie Warren of the Oklahoma City EOC, provided invaluable assistance with the coordination of our COX phone provider, with the 2-1-1 number being operational by 9:00 AM the following morning.

Operational Issues

As Heartline 2-1-1 was operating out of the EOC, access to the database of service providers was unavailable, with referral

services being limited.

As the Oklahoma City Emergency Operation Center had not previously been utilized as a call center, there was no “que”, where calls that are received when all the call specialists are busy are put on “hold”. As a result, individuals had a difficult time in getting through on either 2-1-1 or the five “seven digit” phone lines available.

As Heartline was operating out of an alternate location, transportation arrangements needed to be made in order to assist Heartline Call Specialists to the EOC, due to the hazardous driving conditions.

In pre-disaster planning, Heartline had contact information for the outlying counties that it also serves. With the loss of power in those areas, the contact numbers were inoperable or otherwise unavailable. As a result, Heartline’s ability to provide basic information for those callers outside of the jurisdiction of the Oklahoma City EOC was limited.

During the early stages of the ice storm, citizens experienced problems in being able to access 2-1-1 via their home or cell phones. As those problems were encountered, Carrie DeWeese (State 2-1-1 Collaborative) was able to assist in resolving the issue.



Due to the length of the disaster, many of the service providers did not have adequate staffing for weekend delivery of services. As a result, we were only able to provide assistance in emergency sheltering over the weekend, with no other assistance being available; a frustrating experience for the call

specialists that were desperately trying to connect the callers with appropriate assistance.

Successes

The move of Heartline 2-1-1 to the Oklahoma City Emergency Operation Center was a **critical** success, allowing Heartline 2-1-1 to provide important and timely information to literally thousands of citizens. As a result of the experiences gleaned during this incident, Heartline 2-1-1 has been assured a presence in the EOC in future disasters.

During any disaster, misinformation is always an issue, with various state agencies, news agencies and service providers directing individuals to 2-1-1, on occasion without providing 2-1-1 the information in advance. This necessitated 2-1-1 staff to redirect resources to track down the information. To resolve this issue quickly, Heartline personnel participated in the daily briefings held at the Cox Center. This allowed Heartline 2-1-1 to have immediate information as to the availability of services, as well as address issues of misinformation in a timely manner.

With the consolidation of individual shelters into a community shelter, transportation became problematic for many citizens. The United Way of Central Oklahoma volunteered to provide taxi service for those individuals needing transportation. Heartline 2-1-1 became the coordinating agency, with all transportation issues to and from the COX Center coming through our call center.

For eight days, Heartline 2-1-1 operated out of the Emergency Operation Center and was unable to track our actual call volume, as well as having limited phone

capacity. An unscientific estimate, based upon a manual count of call volumes per hour, would indicate that Heartline 2-1-1 fielded approximately 15,000 to 20,000 disaster-related calls during that time frame. Without question, the number of individuals attempting to call 2-1-1 would clearly exceed that number. Regardless of the call volume, Heartline 2-1-1 staff manned the phones available to us and provided valuable information to literally thousands of Central Oklahoma citizens that needed information about food, sheltering, emergency power and other human services. Even though it was difficult to get through due to the extreme call volume, most citizens were thankful for the information, as well as talking to a “live” person instead of a recording.

Post Disaster

Eight days after the move to the EOC, Heartline 2-1-1 staff returned to the Heartline Call Center. While access to the database allowed an expansion of referral services, call volume has remained higher than pre-disaster levels. It is anticipated that now that more citizens are aware of the services that 2-1-1 provides, the call volume throughout the State will increase. To that end, Heartline is working to meet that need.

Future Planning

The dramatic increase in call volume has taxed the phone system currently being utilized by Heartline 2-1-1. Research has begun on technology that will allow Heartline 2-1-1 to expand its capacity with the expected growth as well as increased capacity during surge periods of call volume.

A back-up power source for the Heartline facility has been applied for through the Office of Emergency Management. Although plans are underway to mitigate the potential for power loss at our current facility, future disaster planning will include having a presence at the Regional Emergency Operation Center whenever an event would be expected to increase call volume for 2-1-1.

While it would be impractical to “staff” for such an event, plans are currently being developed that would provide access of additional personnel for assistance in a disaster. Research has already begun regarding the possibility of adding a substantial number of phones, staffed by those volunteers.

Because of the call volume, service providers would be challenged in contacting 2-1-1 directly to report change in service status, as well as report service availability in our coverage area. Efforts are currently underway where additional phone contact numbers will be exchanged.

Conclusion

2-1-1's daily mission of providing information and referral is a tremendous value to the citizens of this state. As was evidenced during the December 2007 ice storm, 2-1-1 Call Centers are an important state and regional asset during disasters, providing a service that no other agency can immediately provide.

During many of the post disaster briefings, it was pointed out that since 2-1-1 already existed, agencies that would normally have had to create and staff information centers were free to devote their resources to other areas. Working cooperatively, we are able to assist our communities and our state in minimizing loss and quick recovery.

Respectfully,

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